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ABSTRACT

This paper holds that despite, or perhaps because of, the development of recent ideas about diversity and cultural relativity, universities are obligated to teach communication ethics. Further, it holds that the implications of giving bachelor's degrees to students who do not have a solid grasp of universal ethical guidelines are potentially dangerous and far-reaching. The paper argues that a solution lies in presenting communication ethics courses which embrace diversity and its benefits but which reject relativism, that is, the tendency to accept all approaches, views, or practices as equally valid. The paper proposes a communication ethics course based on the effort to encourage students to critically examine options. The paper presents an overview of such a course which begins by stating that a communications ethics course is culturally situated: it holds to certain values, like rational decision-making and the importance of valuing and understanding other cultures, that may not be universally shared--students would be required to identify their own values and biases when making decisions. The paper states that as students progress through the course, they will be asked to offer rationales for their positions and to consider how these rationales reflect the biases and values they identified earlier in the course. A day-by-day overview is offered of what might be done in the first 2 weeks of the course and how course objectives might be met. The paper concludes with a list of "key definitions" and some "troubleshooting" questions. (TB)

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Throwing out the relativity bathwater without losing the diversity baby: Teaching diversity versus relativity in a communication ethics course.

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April, 1995

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The American academia has recognized, initiated, and responded recently to an increasing need of appreciating diversity. This need is not a new one, rather, more educators are learning and teaching more about this growing need and the disadvantages of the "old way" of avoiding and fearing diversity. One can see the trend toward teaching diversity in the increasing number of diversity-focused scholarly writings and texts, new course curriculums including various multicultural studies, and the presence of diversity-oriented academic conferences such as this one.

While morale for diversity appreciation is on an upward trend, the livelihood of ethics courses, particularly in communications curriculums, is in question. In fact, the question over whether or not one can even teach ethics has received so much recent controversy that Newsweek Magazine addressed this very issue as a feature in a January 1995 issue. It appears that while the academia mainstream is leading the way in diversity appreciation, the public is forming a perception, instigated by talk radio, TV talk shows, and editorial columns, that no need exists for the academic study of ethics.

Many problems riddle a typical communications ethics course, and confusing issues to the average undergraduate reach much deeper than recent shots from the public. First, because this field of study is normative and not empirical, many often interpret it to be relative. Second, students are likely to interpret diversity appreciation as relativism, resulting in the perception that we cannot teach the subject of ethics. Third, students are likely to reflect current and popular socio-political ideals that reflect relativism, which potentially limits both thinking and personal growth in two ways. If we allow students to continue to believe that we should value all ideas equally, they will never develop skills necessary to evaluate ideas critically. And If we allow them mindlessly to repeat popular bromides, they will never be challenged to explore ideas in any level of depth.

We strongly hold that universities should teach communication ethics, and that the implications of giving bachelors degrees to students who do not have a solid grasp of universal ethical guidelines are potentially dangerous and far-reaching. A solution lies in presenting communication ethics courses that embrace diversity and its benefits yet reject relativism. Diversity appreciation in this context includes the acceptance of all people as inherently equal, with a commitment to listen to

and review all ideas and perspectives. This includes the admission that one must search beyond his personal experiences into the "marketplace of ideas" to find truth. Diversity appreciation does not include relativism, defined as the acceptance of all ideas as inherently equal and acceptable.

We propose, then, a communication ethics course paradigm that operationally embraces diverse ideas and perspectives and rejects the allowance of relativistic reasoning. This paradigm establishes a course goal of becoming ethical communicators, and seeks this goal through collaboratively establishing criteria for evaluating ideas. We realize that an undergraduate cannot become an ideal ethical communicator in one semester; in fact, one can probably not accomplish the goal of becoming a perfectly ethical communicator in one lifetime. However, this goal statement at the onset of a semester focuses the class in the direction of seeking critical, consistent, rational, and objective criteria for answering ethical dilemmas, which will inevitably draw students closer to becoming ethical communicators. And we can value the diversity theme of separating the person from the idea as criteria for problem solving as it has the potential to eliminate self-interest, it can teach us to perspective-take, and it can bring us a step closer to objectivity. Even if the students make bad ethical decisions with these criteria, they are one step closer to thinking more critically, and we can view our paradigm as a success.

Overview of course paradigm

As stated above, our course paradigm centers upon the goal of studying how to become ethical communicators. We see ethical communication as not something one "acquires" through learning like other behavioral public speaking qualities (i.e., rate, volume, posture). Instead, we see ethical communication as a process of consistently and consciously making communicative choices based upon criteria that reflects one's criteria for ethical communication. Further, we have designed this course to help students select such criteria that steer away from self-interest and separate people from ideas. We do not expect that all students will be motivated toward always being ethical communicators. Likewise, we do not expect that all by taking our course, all students will be consistently ethical communicators even if motivated toward being so. We do, however, feel that accepting the course goal of studying "how to become" ethical communicators is realistic and necessary.

Socio-culturally situated

We do acknowledge that as any other communication course, this course is socio-culturally situated. The very design of this course reflects values that may not be universal nor are they intended to be so. The value we place upon diversity is not universally shared. The concept of separating people from their ideas is also not accepted universally. Consistent decision-making based upon criteria further reflects a western preference for rationality. Although we feel that these undergirding values are present in the design of this course, we feel that they resonate well with the values of the culture of the United States where most of our students will live and work. It is our argument, therefore, that students of communication need to become competent in the application of these values (diversity, consistency, rationality, people/idea separation) toward the

everyday choice-making of communication that indeed have ethical implications.

Course designed with latitude

This course allows for a great deal of latitude. It will proceed like a typical communication ethics course in that it will consider philosophic perspectives and examine a wide array of case studies ranging from the interpersonal communication ethics to media and the St Amendment. The individual topics, case studies, and textbooks can vary from course to course dependent upon the availability of relevant resources and instructor preferences. This course specifically offers a basic framework for encouraging students to engage in consistent critical thinking skills when evaluating any communication ethics issue.

The role of the instructor

The role of the instructor in this course is paramount. She or he must be committed to the paradigm of the course. In other words, she or he must value diversity and the notion that ethical decision-making involves consistency, rationality, and the ability to evaluate/judge ideas apart from people. The instructor must also be prepared to ward off students' grasps toward relativism if they begin to emerge as an easier alternative to critical thinking during class discussions. The instructor in this course should not view his or her role as someone trying to veer students away from relativism toward another ideology possessed by the instructor. Rather, they should view their role as someone committed to:

*creating a safe classroom environment where students can openly discuss and evaluate communication ethics issues.

*encourage students to issues from diverse perspectives.

*encourage students to identify their own values and biases that color their own perceptions of ethical issues.

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•challenging students to offer rationales for their ethical judgements that are consistent with the students' identified values and criteria.

•challenging students to accept and respect all persons, but to realize that ideas can and must be subjected to critical review and judgement.

•encouraging students to avoid self-serving ethical decision-making.

•Pointing out discrepancies in students rationales when they are not consistent with their own sets of evaluation criteria.

•encouraging students continually to reevaluate identified values and biases as students progress during the semester and come to realize the presence of additional biases.

The value/bias lists

Before proceeding with other course content, studentss will begin the process of identifying and listing their core values and biases which affect their perception, sense of morality, and decision-making priorities. The purpose of these lists is to challenge students to realize that all people have biases which affect our decision-making. At times we make ethical decisions which appear inconsistent with what we know to be rational The instructor will help students construct these lists through various in-class exercises designed to produce self-reflection of one's values. S/he will also guide students through exercises to identify their biases which they will learn are inextricably related to their core values. The instructor will stress that biases are not in and of themselves negative or "bad" things. S/he will explain that we all have personal biases due to our values which predispose us to certain "knee jerk" reactions to some issues or more subtle reactions (agreement/disagreement) toward other ethical issues. As students progress throughout the semester and begin to take positions on ethical issues, they will need to offer rationales for their positions. In cases where their positions appear inconsistent with their established criteria lists, they will be encouraged by the instructor to

re-evaluate their bias lists and perhaps make additions which explain their inconsistencies.

Criteria Lists

This is one of the most important elements of this course. At the outset of the course, the instructor will explain the course paradigm and the foundational components designed to encourage critical, ethical evaluation: valuing diversity, accepting and respecting all persons while evaluating critically their ideas, and the avoidance of self-serving rationales. Within the first week of the course, students will be assigned the task of drafting point additional points of criteria individually. These points of criteria can better reflect their values (i.e. a strong religious conviction to never lie under any circumstance). These lists will be important throughout the course as students will take positions on case studies and be required to state their positions on these which are consistent with their criteria. When their positions are not consistent, students are given the opportunity of adjusting their criteria, or maintaining the criteria list but making additions to their bias lists.

Overview of first two weeks

We have stated above that this course allows great latitude regarding course content (textbook, course evaluation methods, exercises, case studies, etc.). Our position is that regardless of these elements of course content, any communication ethics course can be taught using this proposed paradigm and course framework. The first couple weeks of the course should be devoted to the establishment of this paradigm. The established criteria lists, identification of values and biases, and the consensual commitment of students to be consistent to their criteria then sets the stage for the remainder of the course. Here is our proposed schedule of activity to structure the first two

weeks of the course

Day One:

The instructor will introduce the course and its goal. The instructor will lead the class in a discussion wherein students will offer to share their positions regarding the case study. The instructor will ask students to offer rationales instructor will then present a stimulating case study which will leave students realizing that there are no simple for their positions, challenging students to defend their positions good- humoredly to the point where they may admit that they don't really know why they have the positions they do. The instructor will conclude by pointing out that we all make ethical decisions on a daily basis. Unfortunately, we often do not have sound rationales for these decisions aside from the fact that they seem right. And too often we act inconsistent with ourselves. S/he will summarize by pointing out that there is a need for us to develop consistent critical evaluation skills for ethical decision-making.

Day 2:

On this day, the instructor will discuss and define diversity and relativism. Diversity will be discussed and reasons given for why diversity should and must be embraced as opposed to avoided. The instructor will also define and discuss relativism and its effects upon ethical discussions. S/he will explain that appreciation for diversity does not equate with acceptance of all ideas. S/he will stress that appreciating diversity means respecting and accepting all people, but does not mean accepting all ideas through relativism.

Day 3:

Introduce the criteria lists, value lists, and bias lists. The instructor will begin class with

another case study designed to point out our natural tendency toward self-serving decision-making. The instructor will then call students' attention to the course paradigm as listed in the course syllabus. Each of the basic elements of the paradigm will be discussed and explained. The instructor will also review what was learned from the case study from the class period before. S/he will discuss how ethical decision-making often tends toward a situational nature and self-serving purposes. S/he will discuss the need for the establishment of criteria for the consistent evaluation of ethical decision-making. The class period will end with the instructor asking students to review the components of the paradigm and as homework before the next class to choose any additional components they would like to add individually to their criteria lists.

Day 4:

On this day, the instructor will introduce the value and bias lists. The instructor will administer some in-class exercises (i.e. 20 statements answering the "Who am I? question) designed to get students thinking about core values that define who they are and what they believe. After a couple such in-class exercises, the instructor will explain why it is important to understand our core values as they are pivotal in guiding our decision-making. S/he will explain that there are societal (group) and individual values which both inform our decision-making. As a culture we adhere to certain general values and our individual values serve to further define our decision-making.

Day 5:

On this day the instructor will continue leading the class toward recognizing and identifying core values and biases. S/he will present additional in-class exercises to aid this process (i.e. Samovar & Porter's (1994) exercise "Values that Conflict and Correspond"). Students will rank these values. When students have completed this exercise, the instructor

should lead a class discussion asking students how and why they ranked the values as they did. Sharing another brief case study involving communication ethics, the instructor will ask students how their orientation toward the issue is reflected by the way they had ordered their values. At the completion of this discussion, the instructor will assign to the students the task of composing a list of values and biases which should be completed by the next class period.

Day 6:

By the close of the second week of class, students should have drafted and amended their criteria lists as well as lists of values and biases. On this day the instructor will stress that these lists are not "set in concrete," but rather the students initial best effort at establishing criteria and at identifying their values/biases. S/he will explain to students that they will be expected to update and amend these lists as the semester progresses and they become aware of necessary additions or deletions to these lists.

Further, on this day the instructor will explain the journaling component of this course. S/he will explain that students will be expected to keep a journal in this course in which they will describe their reactions to and positions on various case studies presented and issues discussed. In addition to sharing their thoughts in class discussion, all students will have the opportunity to wrestle with their ideas in writing. When additions/deletions are made to their criteria and value/bias lists, students should offer rationales in their journals for these changes. These journals will be collected every two weeks and reviewed by the instructor.

Lastly, the instructor will make reading assignments from selected course textbooks for discussion/lecture beginning the following class period. S/he will explain that these initial class periods have been designed to establish a framework to help them as the course unfolds and specific theories, philosophies, cases, and diverse student viewpoints are discussed. Students will

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be reminded that the purpose of this course is not to learn one particular value system for evaluating ethics. Rather, they will be expected to first understand themselves better. They must recognized their own values and realize that these give rise to biases which color their perception and orientation to ethical issues. Secondly, they must realize that other students (and citizens) possess different values/biases which color their perception in ways different from their own. In the context of evaluating diverse ideas and opinions, then, students will be challenged to first accept and respect the opinion-holder, although openly debate and discuss his/her opinions. Students will be encouraged to openly examine the ideas of others and themselves, consistently against a pre-determined set of criteria which reflects both individual values as well as notions of the common good.

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Key Definitions

Course Goal The goal of this course paradigm is to learn how to become ethical communicators Values associated with the course goal are diversity, consistency, rationality, and the evaluation of ideas apart from people

Value/Bias List This is a list which the student keeps and brings with her to class daily The list will contain between five and twenty biases and values that influence judgments and can prevent objectivity We realize that values and biases are not synonymous, and this issue may be an excellent class discussion topic, but we are operationally treating them the same in our paradigm since both often elicit "knee jerk" reactions when solving ethical dilemmas These lists are the results of the value/bias tests included in the next section.

Criteria List This list will be kept with the value/bias list and brought to class also We designed the course goal and its associated values of diversity, consistency, rationality, and the evaluation of ideas apart from people to be broad as to allow room for individual and collective latitude and creativity. Students will initially compile these lists as a homework assignment, and will be responsible for amending and defending it throughout the semester. For example, a student might value telling the truth in all situations. "Truth," then, would be on his criteria list, and he would apply and defend this criterion in every situation throughout the semester unless or until he decides to amend it.

Troubleshooting

Couldn't students agree to your paradigm yet still rely upon relativism?

Our paradigm virtually eliminates all possibilities of relativistic reasoning. By accepting the course goal of becoming ethical communicators, the students recognize that unethical communication is bad or undesirable. This alone denies the equation of all ideas. Further, if the professor presents the course goal with the associated values of diversity, consistency, rationality, and the evaluation of ideas apart from people, students will find difficulty presenting relativistic arguments that meet this criteria. The professor's role in this paradigm is important, and discussion about this question should not be avoided. Success in this paradigm will only occur if students fully understand this.

What if students do not accept the course goal?

The students should be reminded that they are in a communication ethics course, and that the goal is a practical application of the theories typically presented in a course of this nature. Secondly, the course goal does not *force* students to become ethical communicators, rather, it calls students to learn *how* to become ethical communicators.

What if a students should make an argument that does not agree with the course goal and its associated values?

For example, what if a student argues against a point because she just "feels" that it is wrong. The professor should first attempt to elicit an argument from the student that is consistent with the course goal. If she can not support her claim with a consistent, rational argument, the professor should express compassion and respect for the student, but not accept the comment and stress that the goal of this course is learning to become ethical communicators through critical

evaluation of ideas

What does this paradigm really do for me? Isn't is common sense that a communications ethics class teaches students to become ethical communicators?

Yes, it is common sense, but this paradigm is unique in how it points professors and students in the right direction from the onset of the course. Many courses waste valuable hours in the middle of the term discussing relativism. Many communication ethics courses lose their focus, never establish their focus, and students often make the same "bad" decisions to each different situation and never expand their thought process. All of these problems are alleviated by dedicating the first few classes to address these concerns. By the end of the very first class period, they have agreed to abide by a universal decision-making guideline for the rest of the semester, they have denied relativism, and the professor has pointed them in the direction of critical and autonomous ethical decision-making.